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ENG 4750-001: Studies in African Literature: Passing and the fictions of identity

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Office hours (Coleman 3831): 1:45 – 3:00, Tuesdays/Thursdays, and by appointment
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Required Texts:
Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison” (1899) (handout)
Nella Larson, Passing (1929) (in The Complete Fiction of Nella Larson)
Langston Hughes, The Ways of White Folks (1934)
Danzy Senna, Caucasia (1995)
Adam Mansbach, Angry Black White Boy (2005)
Percival Everett, Erasure (2002)

Course Description:

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

----Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1895

We will read various depictions and analyses of the phenomenon of racial passing, and of other ways in which the metaphor applies to ways of “passing” for something that one is supposedly not. We will often address these questions by using critical and theoretical texts as aids to interpreting literary texts—and vice versa. Students will emerge from this
course with a solid familiarity with primary works in what has become a subgenre of African American literature, “the passing narrative,” as well as other works that stretch the traditional bounds of this subgenre. The course will be organized as a conversation on these matters, with your daily participation central to our work.

Because the success of our conversations will depend so heavily on your careful study beforehand of each day’s readings, we will begin many of our sessions with reading quizzes. These quizzes cannot be made up if you are late or absent; at the end of the semester, I will drop your lowest quiz grade before compiling an average grade. Also, the rule regarding attendance is: be here. If you have more than three absences this semester, your course grade will drop a full letter grade for each absence beyond three.

Course Requirements:

1. Written response and oral presentation: Each student will choose one day on the syllabus. For this class session, you will write a one-page, single-spaced response/review. You will duplicate and hand out this written response to each of us on the day of your presentation, and it will function as your guidelines for leading class discussion for a significant portion of the session. Suggestions: focus attention on a problem or set of problems, and the writer or director’s apparent solution(s); make connections, within the text, and/or with others; zero in on a significant or surprising aspect of the text; the written response should end with at least two questions whose answers provide, as you see it, keys to understanding the text under discussion. Don’t plan on talking by yourself for long—your primary goal is to stimulate discussion. After the discussion of the text, you will then revise your response (into something no more than two pages, single spaced) on the basis of your reaction to how class discussion changed (or verified) your response. This revision will be due one week after the in-class presentation. (15%)

2. 5-7 page critical essay: This paper will focus on two of the non-literary writers and their articles listed on the first half of our syllabus. It will concentrate on points of contact, convergence, and divergence in their arguments, and like the longer essay, it will follow traditional conventions for academic essays (e.g., unity, coherence, proper formatting and MLA-style documentation, and so on). You are free to connect their insights to works of literature (either on or off our syllabus) or to other “cultural products,” or you can focus on the arguments themselves. You are also encouraged (but no, not required) to read, consider, and perhaps incorporate other work by either or both of these writers. Because this essay is due right after midterm, you can think of it as a kind of take-home midterm, assigned very early. (20%)

3. 10-15+ pages research essay: This paper will focus on one of the literary texts on our syllabus, or another of your choosing, with my prior approval. The topic is open, as long as it relates directly to some of our readings and discussions, and a 250-400 word proposal will be required beforehand. The essay must reflect your close attention to and understanding of insights and interpretive concepts that will have arisen throughout the semester, and of course, it must be an entirely new essay (not something you wrote for a previous course. (25%)
4. Final exam: a take-home essay exam that asks you to answer a certain number of questions chosen from a larger number of questions. (25%)

5. Active, thoughtful class participation: I will not deliver lectures in this class; because we are a relatively small group, we must contribute together to a positive, challenging, interesting learning environment. Doing so will call for your careful concentration before class on each assigned reading, and your willingness to share your thoughts, questions, and feelings with others about what you read and hear. (15%)

Other Matters:

**E-mail activity:** Enrollment in this class requires an e-mail account, and you must check it frequently for messages pertaining to the course. I will use your e-dress to subscribe you to a class listserv, where I will post occasional announcements to the class, and where class discussion will sometimes continue. E-mail is also the quickest, easiest way to reach me if I am not in my office; I welcome any and all questions and comments. Using e-mail is crucial for this course. If you do not send me an e-mail message (write to tdengles@eiu.edu) by Friday, January 11 at 3:00 p.m., I will assume that you have chosen against fully participating in the course, and I will therefore drop you. See the Daily Schedule for this assignment’s further details.

**Academic honesty:** I expect you to act honestly and do your own work in this class, and so does Eastern Illinois University. It is your responsibility (once again) to familiarize yourself with the English Department’s policy on plagiarism: “Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—‘The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one’s original work’ (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.”

**A bit more about essays:** All writing assignments are due at the beginning of the class period on the day they are due, whether the student is in class or not. Late-paper penalty: fifteen points each day late. When the final essay (not the first one) is turned in, it MUST be accompanied in a manila folder by all notes and drafts written towards it, with the final copy of the essay on top of this material. I will use these materials to gauge and offer comments on your writing process. I WILL NOT GRADE a final essay that is not accompanied by material that clearly demonstrates several earlier stages leading up to the final draft, so be sure to save all such materials (if you do most or all of your writing on a computer, print out occasional drafts to include with your final copy). Final essays unaccompanied by materials that clearly demonstrate several stages of development toward the final copy will receive an automatic ZERO.
ENGLISH 4750: DAILY SCHEDULE
(this schedule may be subject to change)

Note: This schedule may change; any changes will be announced in advance. Reading and writing assignments are to be completed by the dates on which they appear on the syllabus. BE SURE to bring the appropriate handout or book to class if a reading assignment is listed for that day; students who show up without a copy of the day’s reading assignment may be marked absent.

T JAN 8 Introduction to the course

R JAN 10 Read handout from Tuesday before class: Charles W. Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison”

F JAN 11 3:00 p.m.: Deadline for sending Dr. Engles an e-mail (tdengles@eiu.edu):
- since I teach several courses, explain which one you’re in (English 4750)
- describe yourself in whatever ways you like, including your career aspirations
- After reading the above “course policies and procedures” carefully, write a statement in this e-mail saying that you have read and agree with them (also, if you disagree with any of them, you’re welcome to describe those)
- finally, as with all e-mail messages sent to your teachers, type your name at the end of it, as you would in a letter


R JAN 17 The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

T JAN 22 The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man


T FEB 29 “Modernism and the New Negro Movement” (handout) and begin Nella Larson, Passing

R JAN 31 Passing

T FEB 5 Finish Passing, and also read in Passing and the Fictions of Identity: Martha J. Cutter, “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction”

R FEB 7 Langston Hughes, selections from The Ways of White Folks and “Fooling Our White Folks” (handout)
T FEB 12  In *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*: Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black” (up to page 260)

R FEB 14  Film-screening: *Imitation of Life* (directed by Douglas Sirk, 1959)

T FEB 19  Continue *Imitation of Life*

R FEB 21  discussion of *Imitation of Life* and of reading (handout)

T MAR 4  Danzy Senna, *Caucasia*

R MAR 6  *Caucasia* (Official semester mid-term)

MAR 10 – MAR 14  Spring Break – No classes

T MAR 18  *Caucasia*

R MAR 20  *Caucasia*

T MAR 25  *Caucasia*

R MAR 27  Adam Mansbach, *Angry Black White Boy*

(F MAR 28  Deadline for W for Course Withdrawal)

T APR 1  *Angry Black White Boy*

R APR 3  *Angry Black White Boy*

T APR 8  *Angry Black White Boy*

- Final paper proposal due

R APR 10  Percival Everett, *Erasure*

T APR 15  *Erasure*

R APR 17  *Erasure*

T APR 22  *Erasure*

R APR 24  *Erasure*; Final day of class; final paper due

FINAL EXAM: take-home due by Thursday, May 1, 2:30 p.m.